# Ford's The Good Soldier and the Unreliable Narrator

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Abstract

The Good Soldier is Ford's masterpiece, distinguished by its technical virtuosity, its Jamesian indirection, and its air of fissure and tension. Initially entitled The Saddest Story it first appeared in Wyndham Lewis's Blast, the mouthpiece of the English Vorticist movement. The summer that the first instalment of The Good Soldier appeared in Blast, Ford published an important theoretical essay in the journal Poetry and Drama titled 'On Impressionism' which explains in detail Ford's theoretical precepts regarding Impressionism. This novel written during the same time is deeply entrenched with Ford's Impressionist ideals of novel-writing. The feature that makes The Good Soldier so interesting to us is the use of an unreliable narrator as its primary narrator. By choosing as his narrator John Dowell, Ford turns the entire narrative into a maze of false clues, misinterpretations, and unanswered contradictions. There is hence a shift from nineteenth century certainty to modernist disorientation through Dowell's increasingly untrustworthy narration. These

uncertainties become even more acute when Dowell turns from the attempt to understand others and tries to understand himself. Dowell tries to process his sense-impressions, interpret it subjectively, before passing it on to his reader. This is where Dowell faces problems and becomes the famous Impressionist (and Modernist) feature, an 'unreliable narrator'.

Keywords: Ford Madox Ford, Impressionism, Narrative Technique, Perspective, Unreliable Narrator.

The Good Soldier, perhaps the most acclaimed of Ford's novels, was published in 1915. Thomas Moser speculates in The Life in the Fiction of Ford Madox Ford that while writing The Good Soldier Ford may have been reading Chance, "that last most intricate instance of Marlovian impressionism" [1], while David Totter calls The Good Soldier "the finest Conrad novel ever written in English" [2]. Initially entitled The Saddest Story, it first appeared in Wyndham Lewis's Blast, the mouthpiece of the English Vorticist movement. In his "Dedicatory Letter" to Stella Ford, Ford wrote thatin this novel he had put "all that I knew about writing" [3]. The Good Soldier is indebted to Henry James for its theme of sexual deception and revelation, as well as for its setting and its transatlantic theme. Ford here is also influenced by Flaubert, especially in his transformation of the mundane repetitions of Ashburnham's multiple affairs into a narrative pattern of complex significances and ambivalence. Ford was very pleased when, as he himself mentions in the "Dedicatory Letter", John Rodker called The Good Soldier "the finest French novel in the English language" [3]. The Good Soldier is narrated in the first-person voice of John Dowell, one of the four protagonists of the novel. What distinguishes this novel from other works of Ford and makes it an extremely interesting reading experience is that Dowell is an unreliable narrator of this tale, and we as readers cannot implicitly trust his version of the events which he is narrating. This places the onus of interpretation on the readers, who have to act as detectives to ferret out the hidden clues of Dowell's narrative. Dowell's story is about the nine-year acquaintance (from 1904 to 1913) that he and his wife Florence had with a British couple, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham; the events of the novel reach the reader in a disjointed way as Dowell is not narrating chronologically, he shifts back and forth between past events and his own reflections on those events.

The Good Soldier has a complex narrative technique in which Dowell is the primary narrator and the story he narrates is either his own experience or what he has learnt from Ashburnham or Leonora. Dowell gives us in a very disjointed manner a description of the early history of Edward and Leonora Ashburnham, their early youth and their married life and the frequent clashes between these two very different personalities, partly due to their upbringing as English Protestant and Irish Catholic. It is in Part Three of the novel that Dowell tells us how Ashburnham and Leonora's marriage were fixed by their parents. However, Dowell had narrated instances of differences

between them right from Part One of the novel. According to Dowell, Ashburnham is "too much of the sentimentalist . . . whose mind was compounded of indifferent poems and novels" [3]. Leonora on the other hand appears to Dowell as a "perfectly normal woman": "She desired children, decorum, an establishment; she desired to avoid waste, she desired to keep up appearances. She was utterly and entirely normal even in her utterly undeniable beauty" [3]. Leonora, thus, is a part of prevailing conventions and passionately longs for them. As we see here in the cases of Leonora and Ashburnham, Dowell the narrator tries to place the characters within a wider class, following Ford's precept that the best way to know a particular object is to know its kind. Another instance of such categorization is the classification "good people" which appears frequently in the opening pages of the novel referring to the four principal characters including Dowell himself, his wife Florence, Ashburnham and Leonora. Dowell says of the four of them, "The given proposition was, that we were all 'good people'. We took for granted that we all liked beef underdone but not too underdone; that both men preferred a good liqueur brandy after lunch; that both women drank a very light Rhine wine qualified with Fachingen water—that sort of thing" [3]. However, the description "good people" fails to account for these characters, and the obvious discrepancy between the idealized concept Dowell the narrator offers for these characters and the individual experiences they convey initiate further ironies in the novel. Other characters besides Dowell also use such broad generalizations to classify each other to suit their purposes. For example, Florence seduces Ashburnham after giving him a falsely flattering view of his character—during their visit to the museum at the town of M-, she gestures at the "pencil draft of the Protest" with the signatures of Luther, Ludwig and others, and touching Ashburnham's wrist says: "It's because of that piece of paper that you're honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived. If it weren't for that piece of paper you'd be like the Irish or the Italians or the Poles, but particularly the Irish. . . " [3]. Florence already knows that Ashburnham is a dishonest man who has had multiple affairs outside wedlock. Yet she says that he is "honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived" in order to give his ego a boost so that she can seduce him. Fully alive to the situation at this physical contact and realizing the infidelity that is going on, Leonora becomes furious, though soon she controls her feelings and explains to the concerned Dowell that she had become angry because Florence had criticized the Irish and she is one. Dowell also sees Florence's touching of Ashburnham's wrist, but not being at all a perceptive narrator the significance of it eludes him and consequently the reader too misses the point. Dowell in his narrative continues his absurd generalisations: "For, though women, as I see them, have little or no feeling of responsibility towards a county or a country or a career—although they may be entirely lacking in any kind of communal solidarity—they have an immense and automatically working instinct that attaches them to the interest of womanhood" [3]. Dowell appears to be something of a misogynist when he thinks that all women are "intolerably cruel to the beloved person" [3]. He is similarly caustic in his remarks about the Catholics, confessing within parenthesis that "(I cannot, myself, help disliking this religion . . .)" [3]. He thinks that the "[c]ontinental Papists are a dirty, jovial and unscrupulous crew", and that "Catholics . . . have always reservations and queer spots of secrecy" with "queer, not very straight methods . . . in

dealing with matters of this world" [3]. The readers wonder whether Dowell the narrator is an embodiment of narrow prejudices against a particular class or sect, or if he is an example of an extremely unreliable narrator with a limited perspective. Dowell however concedes at the end: "I don't attach any particular importance to these generalizations of mine. They may be right, they may be wrong; I am only an ageing American with very little knowledge of life. You may take my generalizations or leave them. But I am pretty certain that I am right in the case of Nancy Rufford—that she had loved Edward Ashburnham very deeply and tenderly" [3]. It seems that he does not take his own opinions very seriously for he thinks that he is not knowledgeable enough nor does he have sufficient experience of life to formulate opinions that count. Such a narrator serves to confuse the readers who are unable to believe the narrator or take his opinions seriously.

We have already seen that Dowell begins his story by classifying his wife Florence and Ashburnham as two of the "good people." Yet both of them are adulterers who have cheated on their spouses on more than one occasion. So this classification is ironically subverted as the story proceeds and we find out more about these characters. When Florence describes Ashburnham as "honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived," we as readers are reminded of the fact that besides being a philanderer who has often been blackmailed as a result of his adulterous nature, Ashburnham is also a spendthrift who has reduced his estate to a state of bankruptcy. As a result there is a shift from nineteenth century certainty to modernist disorientation through Dowell's increasingly disjointed narration. Dowell continuously tries to justify the behaviour of others, watches powerlessly as "good people" fall prey to physical passions, and comes to the conclusion that " 'character' is of no use to anyone" [3]. He had attempted to be a detached narrator as found in the nineteenth century fiction and had turned his hero Edward Ashburnham into the "good soldier" of the title. But Dowell's idol turns out to be not at all an ideal character for he had been having a long-term adulterous affair with Dowell's wife. Yet Dowell continues to be unequivocal about Ashburnham's virtues and his adulation of his friend is one of the few consistent elements of his story, and he anxiously wonders at one point: "Have I conveyed to you the splendid fellow that he was—the fine soldier, the excellent landlord, the extraordinarily kind, careful and industrious magistrate, the upright, honest, fair-dealing, fair-thinking, public character?" [3]

Dowell's misleading manner as a narrator continues as he describes the public and private personae of Ashburnham. As a soldier, Dowell says that Ashburnham's record is exemplary—he has the Distinguished Service Order and the "Royal Humane Society's medal with a clasp" and he also has twice been recommended for the Victoria Cross, though he has not received any [3]. His troop is said to have "loved him beyond the love of men" [3]. As a "county magnate", Ashburnham is equally idealized by Dowell; he grants "his tenants very high rebates", allowing a poor man named Mumford to pay no rent at all; he gives "an oldish horse to a young fellow called Selmes . . . [whose] father had been ruined by a fraudulent solicitor"; and just before he dies he spends two hundred pounds defending "the daughter of one of his tenants, who had been accused of murdering her baby" [3]. But in spite of all these adulatory qualities listed by the worshipping Dowell, in actuality Edward Ashburnham turns out to be a morally weak individual with a profound

discrepancy between his almost saintly public life and the shabbiness of his private life. Even his achievements as a soldier become less believable when we recall that most of it had been narrated to Dowell by the devoted Nancy, who makes Ashburnham look like a combination of the legendary Lohengrin, El Cid and the Chevalier Bayard. It is noteworthy in this context that in spite of all his reported heroism, Ashburnham has to be satisfied with the rank of captain till his retirement. As regards Ashburnham's repeated infidelity, Dowell tries to see passion as its own justification. When Ashburnham first "falls" into marital infidelity, Dowell feels that it can be considered an anomaly in an otherwise saintly personality. But by the fifth or sixth time it has become the standard behaviour for him: "poor Edward's passions were quite logical in their progression upwards" [3]. The central moral problem of The Good Soldier is how to judge Ashburnham. He is a serial womanizer who cheated on his wife and his best friend, and eventually conceived a passion for his ward Nancy. Astonishingly, elsewhere in the novel Dowell says that "constancy was the finest of the virtues" Ashburnham had, proving the untrustworthiness of his viewpoint [3]. Dowell forgives him for making him a cuckold and sees him as a man who drifts into affairs absent-mindedly, a man mismatched with a cold wife, who makes a superhuman effort of overcoming his overwhelming love for Nancy, whom until then he had regarded "exactly as he would have regarded a daughter" and it is this passion that ultimately kills him [3]. Dowell feels that he is unable to properly portray Ashburnham and writes that "[i]t is very difficult to give an all-round impression of any man" [3], partly because the impressions do not always cohere. Max Saunders observes in this context, "Ambivalence becomes for [Dowell], as for Ford, a habit of sensibility: a mode of thinking about society, history, and morality. . . . [I]n The Good Soldier Ford invented a character, Ashburnham, at once sympathetic and outrageous, whose story is told by a narrator who is both convincing and ridiculous" [4]. We recall that Dowell's first impression of Ashburnham had confused him as the latter presents a completely impassive façade to the world:

His face hitherto had, in the wonderful English tradition, expressed nothing whatever. Nothing. There was in it neither joy nor despair; neither hope nor fear; neither boredom nor satisfaction. He seemed to perceive no soul in that crowded room; he might have been walking in a jungle. I never came across such a perfect expression before and I never shall again. It was insolence and not insolence; it was modesty and not modesty. [3]

This incomprehension of Ashburnham on Dowell's part continues till the end of the novel. When Dowell identifies with Ashburnham at the end after consistently comparing himself to Ashburnham to his own disadvantage throughout the novel, the situation becomes almost comic:

For I can't conceal from myself that I loved Edward Ashburnham—and that I love him because he was just myself. If I had had the courage and virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much what he did. He seems to me like a large elder brother who took me out on several excursions and did many dashing things whilst I just watched him robbing the orchards, from a distance. [3]

Mark Schorer in his introduction to the Vintage edition of The Good Soldier calls this statement Dowell's "weirdest absurdity, the final, total blindness of infatuation, and self-infatuation" [5]. We as readers are further aware that because of Ashburnham's infidelity, Leonora has suffered for many years. To Dowell he might be a "sentimentalist" as he calls Ashburnham on many occasions, but to her he is lecherous. Though she, like her husband, has no money, she buys expensive travel luggage for him because she is devoted to him, but he does not return the sentiment. He rather flirts with women like Florence who are his mistresses in front of his wife. His many gifts to his tenants make him a profligate in the eyes of his wife, for unlike Dowell she remains aware that he can ill afford to give these concessions. Her final breakdown comes when Leonora finds herself in a "perfectly abnormal situation" after finding out that Ashburnham is in love with her ward Nancy whom she had always considered a daughter [3]. Then "for the first time in her life, she acted along the lines of her instinctive desires" [3]:

She adopted unfamiliar and therefore extraordinary and ungraceful attitudes of mind. At one moment she was all for revenge. After haranguing the girl for hours through the night she harangued for hours of the day the silent Edward. . . . She continued to tell the girl that she must belong to Edward; she was going to get a divorce . . . But she considered it to be her duty to warn the girl of the sort of monster that Edward was. She told the girl of La Dolciquita, of Mrs. Basil, of Maisie Maidan, of Florence. She spoke of the agonies that she had endured during her life with the man, who was violent, overbearing, vain, drunken, arrogant, and monstrously a prey to his sexual necessities. [3]

Dowell the narrator is at a loss to interpret Leonora's character and wonders if this behaviour means "she was no longer herself; or that, having let loose the bonds of her standards, her conventions and her traditions, she was being, for the first time, her own natural self" [3]. He has no answer for this. As Ashburnham and Nancy fall in love with each other, Leonora ends up hysterically urging Nancy to become Ashburnham's mistress. Yet when Ashburnham arranges for Nancy to return to her father, Leonora thinks that this is the "most atrocious thing" that he has done in his "atrocious life" [3], for Nancy's father is a violent lunatic who had killed her mother and once beat her up so badly that she was unconscious for three days. Once again, it is Ashburnham's selfishness, she thinks, that becomes the determining factor here. Her headaches at the end of the novel perhaps suggest that due to the abnormality of her situation she is on the brink of madness. Dowell tries to tell the story with the competency and omniscience of a third person narrator, but faced with these conflicting emotions he is forced to admit his limitations and his incomplete knowledge by repeating "I don't know . . . I know nothing" [3]. By using Dowell as his narrator, Ford turns the entire narrative into a maze of false clues, misinterpretations, and unanswered contradictions.

These "difficulties become even more acute and the ambiguities more refractory when Dowell turns from the attempt to understand others and tries to understand himself" [6], though Dowell remarks, "I don't know that analysis of my own psychology matters at all to this story" [3]. The

readers are often given confusing statements by Dowell about himself. We do not know what he looks like except the fact that he is short of stature. The things he tells about himself do not always prove to be trustworthy subsequently. He tries to portray himself as a passionless and undemonstrative man. Yet his actions show him as a violent person. When his black valet drops Florence's medicine bag, he attacks him: "I saw red, I saw purple. I flew at Julius . . . I filled up one of his eyes; I threatened to strangle him" [3]. Dowell had already told us that he hated Florence with "the hatred of the adder" and that she feared him: "She was afraid that I should murder her", and that "she was frightened for her life. Yes, she was afraid of me" [3]. He thinks at one point that it is this fear rather than the revelation of Ashburnham's feelings for Nancy that led Florence to commit suicide. According to Dowell, Florence has trapped him into a marriage of convenience in which she uses the fiction of weak heart to justify a separate bedroom. Dowell says that she had "never mentioned her heart" till the night of their elopement [3]. Later, on board the Pocahontas, the ship's doctor seconds Florence's diagnosis, instructing Dowell that he "had better refrain from manifestations of affection" [3]. Florence and her lover Jimmy hatch the plan for a separate cabin for her, exploiting her husband's gullibility: ". . . that fellow impressed upon me that what Florence needed most of all were sleep and privacy. I must never enter her room without knocking, or her poor little heart might flutter away to its doom" [3]. This arrangement leaves her free to engage in adulterous relationships, first with the American painter Jimmy and then with Ashburnham. Yet, on the day Florence and Dowell eloped to get married, she had kept Dowell waiting "an unconscionable time" before she followed. Dowell says bitterly that "that wait was the only sign Florence ever showed of having a conscience as far as I was concerned" [3]. Dowell feels that Florence had tricked him into marrying her and had already made plans that she would make him a cuckold and lie to him. In this sense he feels that she never showed any conscience. However, there is an alternate possibility presented and it is possible for the reader to sympathize with Florence, for though she had married him hoping that marriage to him would offer her an escape into freedom and Europe, she is aware how oppressively passionless her marriage to Dowell would be. On the day of their elopement, it was Dowell who had rejected her advances. This is how Dowell sees himself, acting in a cold, rather unreciprocating manner:

She received me with an embrace of warmth . . . Well, it was the first time I had ever been embraced by a woman . . . I suppose it was my own fault, what followed. At any rate, I was in such a hurry to get the wedding over, and was so afraid of her relatives finding me there, that I must have received her advances with a certain amount of absence of mind. I was out of that room and down the ladder in under half a minute. [3]

At this description, the reader is left uncertain about the true nature of Florence's deception of her husband, whether she was deceiving him or Dowell was deceiving her. Kept almost imprisoned by her maiden aunts, she wants to flee from her confinement into freedom and happiness by marrying Dowell. But, as we see here, Dowell the character who happens to be the narrator is not interested in the kind of intimacy she desires. This is perhaps why she is led to seek sexual pleasure and comfort from Jimmy and later from Ashburnham. Such a scope for ambivalent readings of

Dowell the narrator makes Sondra J. Stang say that we should "assume an unrelievedly critical attitude toward everything he tells and keep our eye on him at every moment, or the story gets away from us" [7].

The novel deals with Dowell's impressions seen from his unique perspective. His narratorial stance changes repeatedly. Dowell sees the incidents around him and we as readers observe Dowell in the act of seeing and realising the significance of these incidents. The book opens with a conspicuous and enigmatic statement from Dowell: "This is the saddest story I have ever heard" [3]. However the story he recounts is one in which he participated, not one he simply has heard. This perhaps is his attempt to maintain a cynical disengagement from the events to which he is so disastrously connected. It may also be due to the fact that he has indeed listened to Ashburnham and Leonora to learn of some of the events he is narrating. The use of multiple points of view helps him in maintaining this stance of detachment from the story. He tries to be objective in his narration, and at one point he says: "I have explained everything that went before it from the several points of view that were necessary—from Leonora's, from Edward's and, to some extent, from my own. You have the facts for the trouble of finding them; you have the points of view as far as I could ascertain or put them" [3]. Dowell tries to be equally non-partisan in his recital of Ashburnham's final passion for his ward Nancy whom he and Leonora had brought up almost as their daughter from the time Nancy was thirteen years old, hesitating about whether to judge it as blameworthy or to consider it as the natural culmination of a lifetime's quest. Ashburnham is convinced that this is the culminating passion of his life and that he has found what he was seeking for so long in this girl. Leonora on the other hand firmly believes that Nancy does not love Ashburnham because she has revealed to the girl all about his past marital infidelities. Dowell comments:

Leonora held passionately the doctrine that the girl didn't love Edward. She wanted desperately to believe that. It was a doctrine as necessary to her existence as a belief in the personal immortality of the soul. She said that it was impossible that Nancy could have loved Edward after she had given the girl her view of Edward's career and character. Edward, on the other hand, believed maunderingly that some essential attractiveness in himself must have made the girl continue to go on loving him—to go on loving him, as it were, in underneath her official aspect of hatred. . . . I don't know. I leave it to you.

Dowell also describes the deeply torn anguish of Leonora at this unexpected turn of event—her maternal love for the girl struggling with her feeling of sexual jealousy directed at her. When Ashburnham arranges for Nancy to go to India to live with her father Colonel Rufford and thinks that though Nancy is inviolable she will continue to love him from afar, Leonora opposes this plan fiercely both because Nancy is terrified of her father and also because it would deprive her of the chance to go on oppressing Ashburnham with the girl's presence. Dowell brings to us both Ashburnham's and Leonora's perspectives regarding this matter. He then addresses the readers:

There is another point that worries me a good deal in the aspects of this sad affair. Leonora says that, in desiring that the girl should go five thousand miles away and yet continue to love him, Edward was a monster of selfishness. He was desiring the ruin of a young life. Edward on the other hand put it to me that, supposing that the girl's love was a necessity to his existence, and, if he did nothing by word or by action to keep Nancy's love alive, he couldn't be called selfish. Leonora replied that showed he had an abominably selfish nature even though his actions might be perfectly correct. I can't make out which of them was right. I leave it to you. [3]

This clash of opinions between the opposite perspectives of Ashburnham and Leonora is not resolved in Dowell's voice. As a result there is confusion in the reader's mind about which point of view is authorial. Sara Haslam says that after collecting the individual points of view of the other characters, "Dowell has to process his sense-impressions, interpret it subjectively, before passing it in all its illuminating glory on to his reader. And this is where Dowell gets into difficulties . . . and simultaneously becomes one of those modernist accoutrements, an 'unreliable narrator' " [8]. Dowell himself becomes confused and passes on this confused sense-impression to the reader.

The novel's irony and pathos rest on the fact that Dowell has not realized the truth of what has happened to him, so in the story he narrates he seems to be an external observer to whom the true significances of the events have to be explained. Dowell is deeply involved, both personally and emotionally, in the tale he recounts—most importantly in his wife's protracted infidelity with Ashburnham. So his stance of narratorial impartiality and distance is surprising. The eventual revelation of his wife's infidelity from a casual remark by Leonora shows him the extent to which he has been an "ignorant fool" as even Leonora thinks that he knew of it beforehand: "That was how I got the news—full in the face, like that" [3]. He realizes that the reader would think him to be not trustworthy as a narrator: "You may think that I had been singularly lacking in suspiciousness; you may consider me even to have been an imbecile" [3]. But even after this realization he remains a not always dependable or consistent observer of the world. We the readers witness the process of Dowell's understanding of events as he gathers new information from others. His knowledge is built up retrospectively as his former information is contextualized in the narrative.

Dowell is a typical example of an unreliable narrator. He begins his "saddest story" with the assertion that he and his wife "knew Captain and Mrs Ashburnham as well as it was possible to know anybody" while declaring, in the same breath, that "we knew nothing at all about them" [3]. At the beginning of the novel Dowell had informed the reader regarding his wife's health, "You will gather from this statement that one of us had, as the saying is, a 'heart', and, from the statement that my wife is dead, that she was the sufferer" [3]. Yet we soon come to know that there was nothing wrong with Florence's heart in the literal sense. The superficial meaning of the sentence turns out to be untrue, and the statement illustrates how appearances can be deceiving. Similarly he tells on more than one occasion the he loathes Leonora, and yet, he tells us more than once that

he loves her. She seems to be "a cold fiend" from Dowell's point of view whom Ashburnham found "cold and unsympathetic" and who "with her hunger, with her cruelty had driven Edward to madness" [3]. Yet at the end of the novel Dowell contradicts himself and says that he would "very cheerfully lay down [his] life . . . in her service" [3]. Dowell makes mistakes about dates and names of his characters, contradicts and repeats himself, forgets about things, tells lies and exaggerates, and gets events in the wrong chronological order. He thus repeatedly misleads the reader. Vincent J. Cheng has noted that there is an apparent confusion about the date of the first meeting of the Ashburnhams and the Dowells at Nauheim, and the fact that Dowell seems to finish writing the novel in the beginning of 1916 whereas it was published in 1915 [9]. Many other critics have also noted Dowell's inconsistencies about dates, the most serious being that 4th August 1904 is the date of the afternoon visit by the Ashburnhams and the Dowells to the town of 'M-', but it is also the date on which the two couples are supposed to have met for the first time, in the evening. This is also the date on which Maisie died, and this happened after Dowell had known her for about a month. So the beginning of July is the earliest possible time for the first meeting of the Dowells and the Ashburnhams. Another confusing issue is why the German town Marburg has been referred to as M-, unless it is part of Dowell's obscuring narrative style. There is no consensus on whether these inconsistencies are Dowell's unintentional errors or intentionally made by him. If this is intentional on Dowell's part, he is an unreliable narrator, knowing more than he pretends, deceiving us as he himself has been deceived. Dowell must be aware of these slips on his part, for he is extremely conscious of his role as a narrator. He is perhaps deliberately being unreliable. Sara Haslam calls Dowell "an extreme example of the unreliable narrator" [8]. Sondra J. Stang observes:

[Dowell is] a pretender to innocence, a master of obfuscation, a manipulator of every trick, the most unreliable of unreliable narrators. There are overstatements, understatements, denials, lies, evasions, contradictions, accusations, exaggerations, puns, apparent irrelevancies, logical fallacies, omitted links, digressions, sharp anticipations, delayed explanations. . . He embarrasses, bullies, confuses and tests the reader; he presumes on his credulity; . . . misleads with false emphasis; he lurches from self-denigration to self-promotion and back; he suddenly varies the intensities and the volume and pushes himself into the story. And he repeats. [7]

Ford is here shifting the novel's interest away from the perceived world in order to examine more minutely the nature of perception and the psychology of the perceiver to such an extent that his peculiarities, evasions and motivations become as much the object of interest to the reader as the story he is narrating. Michael Levenson says in this context, "Dowell . . . defies norms of consistency and purpose, . . . credits the most implausible lies, whose moral valuations shift from sentence to sentence, whose memory leaks like an old man's, and whose attention wanders like a child's" [10]. The problem with Dowell is that although he continually violates our expectations of rational behaviour, he has committed no violence or acts of lunacy. On the contrary he has written a novel which is a creative act. Dowell as a character is described by himself in terms of nullity, as having "no occupation", "no business affairs", "no attachments, no accumulations", and

time-shift and goes back to the past and relates about Ashburnham's suicide after receiving Nancy's telegram. This is the inevitable conclusion towards which the story has been moving forward from the beginning and which had been hinted more than once earlier in the narrative. But he adds the details almost as an afterthought creating an illusion of reality usually achieved in an oral narrative. Just before he describes Ashburnham's death, Dowell gives us an image of Nancy who has gone mad hearing of Ashburnham's death forewarning us of it: "Well, that is the end of the story. . . . The villains—for obviously Edward and the girl were villains—have been punished by suicide and madness" [3]. Two pages after this Dowell again goes back in time and describes how Ashburnham commited suicide with his penknife. This had happened in the narrative past—for Leonora is now remarried and pregnant, but it is only at the very end of the novel that the reader is taken back in time to the past and comes to know how Ashburnham died.

The baffled sense of the uncertain as chronicled by Dowell in his narrative represented "life" to Ford. Ford said elsewhere:

Impressionism exists to render those queer effects of real life that are like so many views seen through bright glass—through glass so bright that whilst you perceive through it a landscape or a backyard, you are aware that, on its surface, it reflects a face of a person behind you. For the whole of life is really like that; we are almost always in one place with our minds somewhere quite other. [11]

The method he evolved with Conrad involved the playing of doubt upon accepted ideas in order to question the veracity of reality by contrasting it with what appears to be real. Through the use of Dowell as an unreliable narrator, Ford entangles the readers in a complex web of situations where apparently unrelated clues ultimately lead the readers to a fuller understanding of the story being presented to them. Dowell acts as a mirror or reflector, alternately polished, cloudy or warped, through which the narrative of the novel is mediated, marking one stage in the development of the subjective method of narration, by moving out from authorial omniscience and objectivity to a more and more subjective kind of narration.

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